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KIERKEGAARD AND NIETZSCHE: THE LAST PHILOSOPHERS

by
Peter Seigh

For whatever reason, Western philosophy has always emphasized the rational nature of things. Occasionally the irrational was acknowledged, as with Descartes and his deceiving Demon, but eventually the rational was demonstrated to be reigning over the irrational. This tendency to posit the rational order of all things came to fruition with Hegel, who turned reason into a crystal palace where one could not “put out one’s tongue or make a long nose on the sly” (Dostoevsky 210). With Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche comes the collapse of the Crystal Palace.

The Individual and the Absolute

To begin, let us assume that philosophy (a) must be rational, and (b) must reflect the Truth—not just particular truths, because particular truths are relative—but rather *the* Truth, the *terra firma* of all existence (philosophers are very ambitious). Taking both of these requisites into account, we would need a rational totality which would encompass everything—logic, music, art, history, trees and butterfly wings.

Such a system would encompass the whole universe and our whole lives, and we would cease to have any self-proclaimed meaning. If we were to watch this system form itself out of a void, wouldn’t we, from the depths of our being, yell “enough” at this parasite of a system?

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche did, and when they did, the Crystal Palace shattered, thereby demonstrating the individual’s power over and above the Absolute. Each carried out his task in his own individual way, not in a systematic way. They wrote not for the “rabble” who adhered to the system, but for those special individuals who stood outside the system. Only they were able to understand.

Ethics and Necessity

Hegel did acknowledge the possibility of evil actions in human behavior, but he saw the choice of Good over Evil as a “necessary” choice in the historical development, one that inevitably comes about as we progress toward the Absolute. Thus one could be assured that, although there was no immediate acknowledgement of the good of one’s actions, in an ultimate sense all actions

were a necessary component in the process of Spirit's revelation.

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche deny any necessity leading to some rationally justifiable end. "Every movement of infinity is carried out through passion, and no reflection can produce movement," asserted Kierkegaard. The actor acts in the moment, and no script can be of any use. Nietzsche goes further by proclaiming that any notion of consciousness is itself illusory, and thus Good and Evil are not actualities, but counter-instinctive contrivances which help preserve the species (BGE 11).

Following this logic, we must conclude that the individuals are alone in their responsibility for the ethical outcome of their actions. Can we handle the responsibility? Whether we can or not, still we must. Abraham may feel that he is acting righteously in sacrificing his son, but we who have never spoken to God gasp at his madness. We may follow Nietzsche's suggestion that we rise above the notions of Good and Evil, but even he warns us: "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster" (BGE 89).

The Guilt of the Individual

Drawing out the implications of an ethics without necessity, we are confronted with a terrifying possibility: a world devoid of justice, in which either God exists and allows billions to suffer and die, or there is no God, no absolute judge of good to set things in order.

In a universe without justice, all incidents of the most violent magnitude stand on the same level of importance as the most insignificant trifles, and Abraham is "either a murderer or a man of faith" (FT/R 57). The reflective individual must eventually be confronted with this absurdity. Does a God who would equate murder with religious faith deserve our faith? But to judge God is dangerous, as Job discovered.

The problem exists in the universe, yet every individual must answer for it, not by choice, but just because we are conscious of being individuals ourselves, and therefore know (in an immediate sense) what guilt is. Or as Kierkegaard states it:

Now sin is precisely that transcendence, that *discrimen rerum* [crisis] in which sin enters into the individual. Sin never enters into the world differently and never has entered differently. So when the single individual is stupid enough to inquire about sin as if it were something foreign to him, he only asks as a fool, for either he does not know at all what the question is about, and thus cannot come to know it, or he knows it and understands it, and also knows that no science can explain it to him [emphasis added]. (CA 50)

In Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Joseph K. is informed of this harsh reality by the priest:

"But I am not guilty," said K.; "it's a mistake. And, if it comes to that, how can any man be called guilty? We are all simply men here, one as much as the other." "That is true," said the priest, "but that's how all guilty men talk."
(Kafka 264)

K. continually asserts his innocence in the eyes of the world, but just by virtue of his attempt to redeem himself in the eyes of the court, he demonstrates his guilt. Here he tries to wash his hands of guilt altogether by asking how it is possible to be guilty, but as the priest points out, the question itself, like the question of the inquirer in Kierkegaard's passage above, is itself indicative of guilt.

From Nietzsche's perspective, the concept of Evil is due at least in part to the herdsman's over-estimation of himself:

The European disguises himself with morality because he has become a sick, sickly, crippled animal that has good reason to be "tame;" for he is almost an abortion, half made up, weak, awkward. (GS 295)

Thus we behave ethically not because our actions can be seriously detrimental, but rather as an ego rationalization to compensate for our inferiority.

Why Did They Write?

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche present their philosophies in a way which is consistent with their views of reality- -they write with intentional ambiguity. Both are "philosophers of the dangerous 'maybe'" (BGE 11). Kierkegaard proclaims to write "in such a way that the heretics are unable to understand it" (FT/R 225). For those of us who will accept the view that it is we who are responsible for Good and Evil, we who would praise ourselves for being the exclusive audience that these men are writing to, what are we to learn from them? How are we to behave? Have we really learned anything by reading their works, if Evil is something which exists in the immediate action and not in the linguistic system alone?

As for the philosophers themselves, why did they write if they knew that the ones who would understand them would be those who had this special type of wisdom?

They wrote for the reason I mentioned earlier: they saw the Palace of Crystal forming out of nothing, coming to take them over. All of their projects, *their* ethical evaluations would be taken

up unless they as individuals spoke out. If the system was going to deny individual purpose, then the individual would have to deny the system. Or in the case of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, he would have to deny systematic validity altogether, and write in a way contrary to systematization. In this same sense, reading their works should itself be an existential experience. What is emphasized in ethics thus is not a particular code of behavior engraved in stone, but rather the sincerity of one's actions; not just some outward measure of sincerity, but a strongly felt *inward* sincerity. The choice between Good and Evil is not an easy objective decision: Kierkegaard calls it the leap into the abyss (CA 61). Nietzsche suggests that we should instead acknowledge the masked nature of the Truth, (notes) which would thus include the true/false dichotomy.

Aesthetics, Ethics, and Justice

In his book *The Naked Ape*, Desmond Morris presents the zoological interpretation of the origin of man. According to this view, our ape ancestors found themselves faced with extinction because their natural habitat, the rain forests, were diminishing and they were being forced out into open land. Given the harshness of the new environment, these autonomous beasts had to band together in order to survive in a setting which would otherwise have exterminated them (Morris 18-21).

We find a similar interpretation in Nietzsche's philosophy: in the dawn of the human race, the individual's instincts were replaced with a weaker moral paradigm for behavior, in order that "the herd" could survive (BGE 110-114).

The community valued weakness over strength so that the weaker would survive, and it is this morality that we value more than our own instincts. Nietzsche seems not to have any sympathy for morality, nor for the "herdsmen" who uphold its truth:

The tree needs storms, doubts, worms, and nastiness to reveal the nature and strength of the seedling; let it break if it is not strong enough. (GS 163)

In contrast to the aesthetic life of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard chooses the ethical life, only to be thrust into the trial of the religious:

The paradox of faith has lost the intermediary, that is, the universal. On the one side, it has the expression for the highest egotism (to do the terrible act, do it for one's own sake), on the other side, the expression for the most absolute devotion, to do it for God's sake. (FT/R 71)

Kierkegaard asserts that the reflective individual will come to value the ethical life over the aesthetic, but herein lies the absurdity: to live the true and good life, the individual would have to assert an absolute relation to the true and the good. But the mortal conscious cannot approach the absolute; God and the absolute are absurdly out of reach of the individual. Thus the ethical individual moves into the religious when he realizes that he is confined to his own subjective criteria for Good and Evil. To serve the absolute is from this perspective to potentially become a monster, as Abraham nearly did. Therefore "the single individual is higher than the universal" (FT/R 55). Or to carry this logic further, the existing individual stands in judgment over existence itself, even over God.

For the twentieth-century thinker wrestling with these two philosophies, a philosophy of paranoia must inevitably result. Nietzsche has developed, in a very sophisticated and invigorating manner, the aesthetic that Kierkegaard first turned away from. This view does not need the weak, the shy, or the reserved—if they can't stand the deluge, then they are ultimately responsible for their own extinction. Turning to Kierkegaard, one finds one's self in judgment of a God who can turn one's whole being to naught. "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods,/ They kill us for their sport," says Gloucester in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (IV,i,36-37). The bitter possibility of a world with no justice: What do I owe such a God? Why should I believe in Him? Why shouldn't I turn back to the aesthetic?—But here both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche agree: the aesthetic and the ethical are distinct. Thus anyone who has fully moved into the ethical will find that this human, all-too-human trait cannot be overcome.

If the aesthetic (with Nietzsche as its spokesman) threatens to destroy the individual, and if God threatens to destroy the individual for standing in judgment over him (as God had threatened to destroy Job for doing), then the only possibility for the individual is to be the impossible: a self-sustained nothing.

What About Me?

Hegel demonstrated that all of the individual's projects —philosophy being the highest of these—taken on face value, are failures. He resolves this problem in an unconvincing way by demonstrating that each individual project is part of a larger process, and that individuals might content themselves with this knowledge. The only genuine reaction for Kierkegaard and Nietzsche was disillusionment: they felt that the whole of rational thought had taken on its own identity and turned a cold shoulder towards them. If this faculty of thought is not going to serve *me* in some reciprocal way, then what do *I* owe it?

In this sense existentialism is a very personal philosophy. Instead of displacing the problematic into a high level of abstraction, out of reach of passionate existence (as Leibniz does in his

Monadology), Kierkegaard brings to light the absurdity of reason at its most mundane levels. The literary comparison is Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, who continues to worry about catching his train and paying the family's debts, almost oblivious to the fact that he has been transformed into an insect.

Commentary

In terms of ethics, I find that I must take the perspective of Kierkegaard. For myself, an ethical life is the only life worth living. And Kierkegaard's analysis of the religious I feel must be acknowledged by the sincere individual who reflectively follows through the implications of his or her actions.

However, what would life be without a touch of the Nietzschean? Carl Jung maintains that the healthy individual must befriend his "shadow" nature. Does an honest, whole-hearted affirmation of one's sensuality necessarily conflict with the ethical life as a whole? Resolution of the two may seem difficult, maybe even impossible, but it is this incongruity which I feel is a source of life's ecstatic ambiguity.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are my two favorite philosophers. I can respect others for their analyses of particular issues—Sartre for his understanding of individual freedom, Derrida for his understanding of language. But taking into consideration the extent to which we expect philosophy to tell us "the way things really are," I find that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard come closest to accomplishing this task by turning metaphysics on its head. They are the last philosophers.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT:

- BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*
 CA *The Concept of Anxiety*
 FT/R *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*
 GS *The Gay Science*